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**English national character vs. Russian national character:
stereotypes**

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Introduction

National stereotypes are a part of human life. It is a question that has been discussed for years. The problem of national stereotypes is many-sided: it concerns culture, behavior, manners. It also concerns traditions, religious, customs and a lot of traits of the nation. Culture can be described as our everyday life, our education, languages we speak, official festivals, religion feasts and others. When we describe any nation we notice how people of this country interact how they say good morning and good bye, what makes them happy or sad. In other words what they do each day. But we should understand that there are two views of seeing nationality stereotypes. The first point of view – how the nation sees itself; the second – how the other nations see it.

For success in international relations it is just as profitable, and indeed just as essential, to understand the character of the nation with which one is dealing as it is to understand the character of an individual in personal dealings. National character includes the predominant traits in the character of individuals within a nation, the effective character of influential groups, and finally the coalescence of individual and group desires when people responds to a crisis as a nation. “The spirit of the people” has a somewhat similar meaning, but is broader than “national character”. The spirit of people express quite clearly the less technical aspect of this subject. The importance of a serious consideration of national character in intelligence estimates and international relations arises partly from the fact that national character is an invisible but vital factor in nearly all of the principal aspects of national life, such as economic, political, military.

A stereotype is a generalized belief about the qualities or characteristics of a particular group of people. Although stereotypes can be positive or negative, a negative stereotype about a group often leads to prejudice (a negative judgment or unequal treatment toward a member of an outgroup). Stereotypes are formed in a social context through a combination of observing others, learning, and mental processes. The question of why stereotypes exist has been debated for some time. Originally, they were thought simply to be a way in which people in positions of power maintain control over others (Johnson, 1976). More recently, researchers have argued that stereotypes exist to help the mind navigate through a complex and often contradictory environment (Hamilton & Sherman, 1994). Without stereotypes, people might have a more difficult time making sense of the world and can often find an ambiguous situation time-consuming or confusing to understand. When people are in these situations, they usually rely on stereotypes to help them evaluate ambiguities and bring deliberations to closure.¹

¹ <https://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Stereotype.pdf>

The purpose of this work is to look into the stereotypes about Russian and British national characters, briefly describe each of them, find specific features and compare them. The basis of this work will be Russians and British proverbs that tell us about the English and Russian characters. Do they confirm or deny common stereotypes? Proverbs is a great linguistic wealth of the people, developed over many centuries. A proverb is not a simple saying. It expresses the opinion of the people. It contains the assessment of life, observation of people's mind. Not every saying has become a proverb, but only one that is consistent with the thoughts and ways of life of many people - a saying could exist for thousands of years, passing from century to century. Behind each proverb, stands the authority of generations who created them. Proverbs don't argue or prove anything - they just claim or deny something, and they are confident that they say the universal truth.

Stereotypes about English national character

1. The national character of the English has been described in different ways, but most commentators agree over one quality, which they describe as **conservatism** and **restraint** in words and emotions.

There are some proverbs that say about one of the main features of the national character of the British - **devotion to traditions and customs**:

- *Custom is a second nature;*
- *There is many a good tune played on an old fiddle;*
- *Old friends and old wine are best.*



2. The British believe that **self-control** is the main virtue of human nature. Words: "Learn to control yourself" like nothing better express the motto of this nation. The better a person is able to control himself, the worthier he is. The famous English restraint, the desire to hide their emotions are the result of a strict upbringing. "Silence is gold", "Less said, faster fixed" - inspire children from a very young age.



These people know the value of words, and the following proverbs say about this:

- *First think, than speak;*
- *Keep your mouth shut and your ears open;*
- *No wisdom like silence.*

3. No less popular character features are **efficiency** and **prudence**. Money is the idol of the British. On every field they spend a lot of time to raise money.

- *Strike while the iron is hot;*
- *A golden key opens every door*

These proverbs describe the British as **clever entrepreneurs**, **energetic** and **tireless** in inventing ways to make money. British believe that dishonest man does not deserve the wealth: **Lightly come, lightly go**

4. It is necessary to say that wealth does not come to the British easily, but come to them through **hard work, integrity, and working skills**, as in proverbs:

- *Never do things by halves.*
- *The early bird catches the worm.*
- *Don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today.*

Such quality as laziness, was totally unacceptable to the British.

5. However, it is well known that the **house** occupies more significant place than work in the life of Englishmen. V. Ovchinnikov in his book "Sakura and the oak" writes: "England is a Kingdom of private life, coat of arms of which could be the image of the hedge and the motto: **"My home is my castle!"**". And what English proverbs say about this? The proverb **"There is no place like home"** is transferring a great love for native home, inherent in these people. The same thing can be said about the saying **"East or West, home is best"**. Hearth takes a great place in their lives. Home for them is truly the center of existence.

With neighbors Britons stay friendly and helpful. With strangers or uninvited visitors usually speak only through the door, not inviting them inside. Guests are invited only in advance and only at a certain hour. An unexpected knocking at the front door is very rare in London. The house serves as the Englishman's castle, where he can hide not only from unwanted visitors, but also from boring troubles.



6. The theme of **family relations** is very common in English proverbs, relations between parents and children. Deep down, Britons believe that the parents should better be more strict than soft.



Widespread English proverb **"Spare the rod means to spoil the child"** confirms this. The higher in society you are, the more strictness you have to show. **"Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise"** – consider the Britons. While children grow at home, they should not be heard. And since school age, ideally, should not be visible. It is a characteristic feature of the English way of life.

7. For Russian people it is astonishing fact that in English families pets occupy a higher position than the children. The British have fervent ***love for pets***. The British are convinced that the person who loves animals, can't be bad. The British find a common language with animals perfectly, although sometimes they are completely unable to find a common language with their children. Britons spend a lot of money on food for their pets. Animals are allowed to do all the things in the house for which children, most likely, will be severely punished. Animals are considered to be incapable of any evil deed. Cruelty to animals is causing horror and disgust.

That is why a special relationship to animals is reflected in the large number of proverbs:

- ***A cat may look at a king;***
- ***Love me, love my dog;***
- ***Every dog has his day***



8. Such qualities of character as ***caution, carefulness, patience*** should be mentioned too. They are unconditionally peculiar to the Englishmen, before you make any deal, they will think several times, and that is confirmed by the following proverbs:

- ***Everything is good in its season;***
- ***Look before you leap;***
- ***Slow but save.***

There are also the large number of proverbs, which says that man is the master of his fate, should not give up, hope for the best and achieve goals. It says a lot about such feature of British character such as ***optimism***.

- ***Every man is an architect of his own fortune***
- ***Never say never***
- ***Fortune favors the bold***

9. Analyzing a large number of proverbs, I can say that Englishmen are such qualities as ***independence, sense of humor, scholarship, exquisite courtesy, dignity, honesty, tact and grace of manners***. They all reflected in English proverbs. However, it should be noted that such features as ***generosity, emotionality, openness*** are not popular in proverbs.

Stereotypes about Russian national character

A lot has been said and written about the inscrutable 'Russian soul' – yet, it still keeps its mystery. Russian national character is similar to Asian in respect to the elder people. In previous centuries it was a usual type to spend very long winter evenings to knit, sew or embroider and to listen to mother's stories of life. In 20th century these traditions were abolished by new style of life. *'Spacious soul' or 'big nature'* - that will be the first thing to hear from a Russian if asked about the Russian national character. The phrase has become a commonplace, while its meaning is not so easy to define. Just picture the vast expanses of this country stretching over the continent and uniting Europe and Asia, with a great variety of landscapes, nations and cultures. One life would not be enough to visit all the places of this land; its spaces are hard to take control over and its riches seem impossible to waste. Hence, the Russian generosity and spontaneity, our weakness for extremes and longing for the unknown, as well as our unpredictability and lack of order and certainty.



1. *"Go there no one knows where and bring nobody knows what"*- that is the task given to the main hero in many Russian tales. The mission sounds absurd; yet, the hero gets a magic object (a clew of threads or an apple) rolling before him and showing the right path to follow. Similarly, a Russian person is guided by intuition (one's inner voice or the Lord's will, whatever) rather than by mere reason.

2. *"All that is done is done for the better"* - one of the favorite Russian sayings goes. On the one hand, it implies optimistic and adventurous outlook, on the other hand, sheer fatalism and passivity - the opposites coming together in Russian people - drifting throughout life, we are apt to adapt to ever-changing circumstances rather than to oppose them. That feature is quite understandable if you take into account our history of upheavals and cataclysms, from the Tatar yoke with numerous barbaric forays to the 20th century with world and civil wars, revolutions, repressions, coup d'etats and shocking reforms.

3. *"Hope for the better and be ready for the worst"* - the Russians say. And our most common hope is that 'it will work out somehow by itself'. 'A peasant needs thunder to cross oneself and

wonder'. Perhaps it is for that notorious Russian carelessness that we are easily beguiled and made use of by various leaders coming in a long train.

4. Justice and law. Unfortunately, in Russia these two notions are far from being synonyms. The Russian people and the authorities are concordant about one thing, which is mutual mistrust. Subconsciously, the state is perceived as a mechanism encroaching upon the rights and freedoms of its citizens instead of protecting them.

"The severity of law is compensated with its loose observance", - they joke here. The laws can be manipulated in the interests of the mighty of this world. So, relations between individuals are regulated by the idea of justice (as a moral feeling), which is prior to law in Russia.



5. Russian patience seems endless as a Russian open country. This people have revealed its ability to endure any privations and severities - an almost superhuman ingeniousness in surviving inhuman living conditions. Moreover, one can suspect a sort of liking to bearing this cross, a certain pride for it. The spiritual experience of the Russian people not in the least proceeding from its sufferings, has given the world invaluable works of art and literature.

6. The habit for hardships and peaceful nature make the Russians conformists: we dislike open conflicts and prefer compromising. *"A lean compromise is better than a fat lawsuit"*, - that's quite true for us. We can long put up with pressure and injustice - but once we explode with all our long suppressed offences - there is no stop to it, watch out!



7. Lazy or efficient? Russian laziness is almost as notorious as Russian 'spacious soul'. Every Russian soul harbours Yemelya, the great idler, a fairy-tale hero, who does not have to get off his favourite place - a stove, as it can carry him anywhere and all his wishes are fulfilled by magic. Russian laziness is dreamy and meditative.

In a philosophic sense, it is opposed to the worldly haste and 'vanity of vanities'. At times we cannot but submit to our *'Mummy-Laziness'* and indulge in musing and wool-gathering - and that in the very thick of work! Not that we welcome or severely criticize it - we rather take it as an elemental force, which can as well endow one with insights and original ideas. Yet, most of these great ideas are not realized for that very laziness. We'll think ten times if something is worth our efforts, before we move a finger.

8. Generous spendthrifts. The vastness of this land implies our full-handedness. Fond of making handsome gestures, we enjoy surprising our friends and guests with generous gifts and regales. Even if the hosts are having hard times, they will do their best to treat their guests well.



Naturally, the same generosity is expected from you - and it should be sincere. Pettiness and greediness are considered real sins here. Counting expenses on friendly meetings or checking the bill in a restaurant will seem petty. It is natural that everyone contributes to the common good as much as one can. Not long ago it was ok to lend money to a friend in need and forget about it.

Nowadays, the commercialization of this country makes the Russians more and more tough-minded and shrewd. But that is not natural for us. It is in our blood to share what we have and hope on somebody's help. Who knows better than the Russians that material wealth is the most unreliable thing? *'God has given, and God will take it back'*, a Russian saying goes, often used with regard to money and possessions. *'Give, spend and God will send'* also suits here.

9. Russian collectivism, which is more than just an aftermath of the Soviet times.

It takes its roots in the communal living of the Old Rus and the Orthodox moral values. Our inclination to work jointly for the common good, share what we have and rely on somebody's help is based on the feeling of kindred with other people.



That is well reflected in the Russian language: a number of words denoting blood relations, such as sonny, mummy, grandpa, grandma, daddy, daughter, sister, etc. can be used when informally addressing somebody, even strangers. The most intimate word expressing deep feelings between soulmates is “*rodnoy*”.

10. "Better have a hundred friends than a hundred roubles". In Russia it works a hundred-per-cent. Personal relations play here a more important role than one's social status or bank account.



The dark side of it is that a person's success often depends on profitable connections rather than on one's talents and professionalism. However, this misuse of the unwritten law on mutual aid is weakening nowadays, together with the feeling of fellowship.

Yet, it is still habitual among students and co-workers to help each other rather than compete, which is more customary for the Westerners.

11. "What is good for a Russian, for a German is death"- another Russian proverb. Nowadays Russia bent on the Western and European standards is driving towards stability and living on credit, convenient but binding. Yet, it will hardly ever become that stable. Extra stability verging on routine is very suppressing for the Russians. Smooth and scheduled living and working void of variation and collision, that makes a European feel comfortable will depress a Russian. Yet, there is no such a risk - we'll always find some entanglements to use our century-old cultivated resourcefulness.

Conclusion

Despite many differences of British and Russian national character stereotypes, it is obligatory to say that there are also some *similarities*. British and Russians are gardeners. Either British or Russians like to work at countryside and to have a garden and plants from their estates. Russians have Dachas and also like to spend time in their gardens while British like to live in their own houses. British and Russians are great drinkers of Alcoholic drinks. British drink beer in pubs and Russians like Vodka. Both British and Russians are superstitious. Like all nations from the North part of the World, Russians and British are closed and not so open-minded as people from South. They are also not so impulsive.



Anyway, Russia is associated with:

- a birch, matryoshka dolls, cold winter, a bear, shapka-ushanka, vodka;
- the words *avos'*, *kak-nibud'*, *ladno*;

The Russians call their country proudly “Rossiymatushka”.

Britain is associated with:

- London, Big Ben, fish and chips, porridge, tea with milk;
- phrases “*How are you?*”, “*Never mind!*”, “*See you later!*”;

The English call their country with great love
“old nice England”.



I also would like to say stereotypes are a part of human life though they may present one sided exaggerated view of religion, racial ethnic groups of people as well as of classes of people. Stereotypes are certainly not reliable description of individual people but they still exist.

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